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ABSTRACT

In order to elicit personal stories of early life illustrating important themes and values that had shaped their lives, southern older adults (N=400) participated in a series of "in-gatherings" in groups of 20-30. Participants in each setting were relatively homogeneous socio-culturally but the locations were varied in race, class, and size of community. Each in-gathering consisted of four sessions centered around a central topic designed to elicit personal stories in a semi-structured format. Participants also made comparisons with contemporary society. A modified content analysis of the session tapes revealed that themes and values such as a hard early life, belief in the work ethic, and the importance of family, church, and community were common to all groups. An important difference among blacks and whites, however, was that hard work had resulted in upward mobility for most whites but not for blacks. This project provides more understanding of rural southerners who migrate to the city and of early experiences and values which contribute to their adjustment to urban life. (AG)

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SHARING THE PAST:
THEMES AND VALUES FROM EARLY LIFE

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Geronological Society, Boston, MA, November 19-23, 1982.

SHARING THE PAST: THEMES AND VALUES FROM EARLY LIFE. Ruth L. Kernodle. Department of Sociology, Christopher Newport College, Newport News, Va., 23606.

Approximately 400 older people in Tidewater Virginia participated in a series of "In-Gatherings" in groups of 20-30 in congregate settings. Participants in each setting were relatively homogeneous in socio-cultural variables, but the settings differed by race, class, size of community, etc. Six topics elicited structured reminiscenses of early life which illustrated important values and themes which helped shape their lives. Comparisons with contemporary society were also made. Some themes and values permeated all of the groups, whether middle class white, lower class black, or immigrant Jew--such things as a hard early life, a strong belief in the work ethic, and the importance of the family, church, and community in shaping their lives. There were also some important differences between whites and blacks, since hard work had resulted in upward mobility for most whites but not for this black population. Whites yearned for the "good old days" but blacks did not, feeling that except for early childhood, and in spite of present relative poverty, that this may be the best time of their lives--a chance to "rest and enjoy."*

During the spring and summer of 1981 a grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy made it possible for the Gerontology Program at Christopher Newport College and Peninsula Agency on Aging to cooperate in a project called "Sharing the Past." Some 400 older people, ranging in age from mid sixties to mid nineties, with the majority being over 70, gathered in groups of 20-30 for an "In-Gathering." Each In-Gathering consisted of four sessions, meeting twice a week for two weeks and was centered around a central topic, such as "Personal Stories," "God and the Good Life," "Food and the Family." The objective was to elicit personal stories of early life in a semi-structured format--stories that would illustrate the important themes and values that contributed to shaping their lives. There were 16 In-Gathering series of four sessions each. Each In-Gathering was facilitated by a humanities professor and at the conclusion of the project each facilitator did an analysis of the tapes of the sessions, pulling out the major themes and values, using stories to illustrate them as given by the participants.

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*Paper presented at American Gerontological Society annual meeting, Boston, November, 1982.

In preparation for this paper, these summary tapes have been analyzed and the author also listened to all of the original tapes (some 70 hours), doing a modified content analysis of the material.

The project location was in Tidewater Virginia. Individual settings for the In-Gatherings included nursing homes, nutrition centers, recreation centers, a Jewish Community Center, and senior housing. Settings ranged from inner city, to small town and suburb. Thus, while the people in any one In-Gathering setting were relatively homogeneous, the settings varied by rural/urban location, socio-economic status, and race. It was thus possible to compare and contrast the stories and responses to the same topic and to the same facilitator of the participants in the different settings, for example an inner city predominantly black group with a suburban middle class white group.

Early Life Experiences

The overwhelming majority of the participants in the project grew up on either small farms owned by their parents, in rural Virginia, North Carolina, or West Virginia, or more commonly were from tenet farm origins. Their migration to the city had usually come in the late 1930's or early 1940's as a response to either the Great Depression or World War II. Most have remained in the same general area since that time. Many of the Jewish groups (only 25 people out of the 400) had migrated to this country in young adulthood and, unlike the others in the project, came from an urban background. Most of the participants had experienced relative poverty and hardship in early life. Many mentioned in their stories the lack of material possessions such as shoes to wear to school, toys, except those they made themselves, candy, except a few pieces at Christmas. The degree of poverty and hardship experienced differed between the blacks and whites for the most part, with blacks experiencing

a much greater degree. There were exceptions to this, such as one of the white men, now in his nineties, who told of his father dying and leaving a wife and family of young children. After struggling and living in abject poverty for several years while existing on the largess of neighbors, the mother, in order for family members to survive, had to give the children away. Most of the Jewish participants also told stories of early poverty and hardships.

Somewhat surprisingly, many expressed the feeling that poverty was not a reason to be unhappy and spoke with some nostalgia about the happiness of earlier years when people were more important than material possessions.

Most of the participants had received what would today be considered a very inadequate education. Many walked some miles to attend a one or two room school and for many school lasted for a very few years because they were needed in the fields. For many blacks this meant dropping out of school after two or three grades; for whites it more often meant completing grammar school. For some of the Jewish women their only education was what they had gotten on their own.

This difference in degree of early hardship contributed to a quite different story as to what this very hard work as young people meant to their adult life. Most of the whites had been able to be upwardly mobile and although they perceived their early life as one of hardship, they or their husbands had ended up as either skilled workers or middle class. On the other hand, while this black population had worked equally hard or harder, their work, for the most part, had not resulted in upward mobility and most were still relatively poor, uneducated, unskilled, and lower class. There were exceptions to this.

Most of the participants were born at home and came from large families, sometimes numbering siblings in the teens. A number told of their own mother

dying young in childbirth and of having step mothers.

One of the topics used to elicit stories from the participants by one of the facilitators was the Great Depression of the thirties, when most of this population were young adults. The Great Depression made a deep impression on the whites. They told stories of ingenuity in making ends meet. They spoke of the depression causing them to have an appreciation for the simple joys of life and to value relationships with people. On the other hand, the Great Depression seemed to have made a minimal impression on the blacks. Some referred to it as the "Hoover Days" and told stories of relatives returning from the cities to the farm in order to survive, but even when pressed, the usual response was that it was, for them, like any other time--hard, but not really different. They lived in a perpetual economic depression.

Themes and Values of Early Life

From the stories and comments of these some 400 older people, what can be generalized about the values and themes of their early life that they felt were of prime importance in shaping their adult lives?

1. First and foremost, was the importance and influence of the family. There were many stories about a warm, caring family of parents, grandparents, siblings, and other relatives who comprised a self sufficient group and which really was the center of their existence. This was a family where discipline was firm, elders were respected, older family members with needs were taken care of. Children were expected to contribute their share through work and most of the simple joys of life came through the family. Most mentioned lack of material possessions but felt this was not important. A very common story among the non-Jewish participants was about Christmas being such an exciting time when each child's total gifts consisted of one homemade toy, a piece of fruit, and a piece of candy. Nonetheless, they remembered Christmas

as a very happy time with the family and neighbors sharing food, singing carols together, going to church, and visiting with friends and family. All recreation was family centered--singing hymns around the fire at night, going berry picking, going to church.

In spite of the family "halo" generally expressed, it should be noted that there were also stories of families where children had to be farmed out because of the death of a parent, of parents who punished harshly, of step-parents who did not love their step-children, of Jewish immigrants being overworked by relatives to the point of possible exploitation--but even these people subscribed to the idea of the family as the most important social institution in contemporary society. They see many of today's problems stemming from a weakened family.

2. The church and religious values played a very important part in the early lives of these people. They firmly subscribe to the religious teachings they received as children but of almost equal importance was the value of the church as a center of social life. For most, and particularly true of blacks, it was the only place of social gathering. Sunday meant all day spent at church with the entire family attending, and it was a combination of religious services, picnic and social gathering. It was here that children played with other children, courting among teenagers took place, and adults socialized. Religion and family were closely connected, with religious devotions being a part of many family evenings and the values of religion being reinforced in the family.

Many participants, particularly black and Jewish, expressed the theme that "God had taken care of them" and that they would not have been able to endure life's adversities without their religion. To most of these people, God was a very personal God.

3. Another theme that ran through the stories of all the In-Gatherings was the sense of community that was present during early life. Neighbors helped each other in times of need, caring for each other's children on occasion, gathering in the crops for a sick neighbor, and many other such examples of cooperation and caring. They spoke with nostalgia of doctors who really cared, of grocers who extended credit in times of need.

4. There was an extremely strong work ethic expressed over and over by this group. Not only had all of them worked hard in early life, they firmly believed in the value of hard work as a virtue in itself in developing character. Work began in early childhood in keeping with their ability to contribute to the family. They also spoke of work as being related to self esteem--apart from monetary return. They felt that they were better adults. because of their experience with hard work. The eroding of the work ethic in contemporary society is a source of concern for them.

5. Another value that emerged which was highly cherished was that of the self-sufficiency they learned while growing up. Because of the hard times and lack of material possessions they learned how to provide most of their food through gardening, canning, raising and butchering animals. The women made clothes, curtains, tableclothes from feed bags; the men could do any maintenance necessary. They were proud that they have continued to use these skills as necessary in their adult lives and have great pride in their ability to be resourceful and to be self-sufficient when necessary.

6. Closely associated with these values were those of courage and endurance. Many expressed pride that they had been able to endure very hard circumstances and persevere. The group in the fishing village in particular had many stories to tell of the courage of their husbands and sons as fishermen battling the elements. Blacks spoke extensively of being able to endure.

There was a general expression of the feeling that they were glad that they had had the experience of being children in the country and in relative poverty and that these circumstances had made them better adults--more resourceful, more self-sufficient, more able to enjoy simple pleasures, more appreciative of family and church, less dependent on modern technology, etc. There was also a generally expressed opinion that our society has changed significantly beginning with WWII--this incidentally was the time most of this population migrated to the city.

Differences in Themes and Values

While both whites and blacks expressed pride in their hard work and perserverence in earlier days, there were also differences in the stories they related about life past childhood. Many whites (Jewish and Gentile) had stories to tell of occupational success, achievements of children and grandchildren, stories of long, happy marriages. They were proud of their achievements. Few blacks had any such success stories to tell. While blacks talked fondly of parents and grandparents, and even some of their siblings, they made little mention of husbands, children, or grandchildren except for expressing concern over what had happened and what was happening to some of them. The children of many of these blacks had moved on to northern cities with contact being minimal with some of them.

Not surprisingly, white men were inclined to tell stories of their occupational life while the stories of white women centered on home and family. Some black women did tell stories of working as domestics or nannies and of their warm relationship with their employers.

When asked to tell stories about the happiest times of life, the stories of blacks were either about early childhood or present times, such as trips taken through the senior center, parties they have there, activities at church.

Rarely did they mention their middle adult years. Whites, on the other hand, had more stories about their young adult years, such as courtship, finding a job, getting married--but rarely mentioned present day experiences.

Whites were much more nostalgic for the "good old days" of close family, community caring, churches that were more responsive to their needs, joys in simple pleasures, etc. Except for some nostalgia for the family of childhood, many of the blacks expressed the sentiment that right now was the best time of their lives--a time to rest and enjoy. This, while still living in relative poverty, but living with more economic security due to social security and SSI. with more opportunities for recreation, thanks to senior programs. Among whites there was an interesting pull between their present comfortable economic situation and material possessions as signs of achievement, contrasted with their yearning for the simple days of their youth. They realized, to some extent, the clash in these values.

Many whites expressed patriotic themes--that is the best place in the world to live, that "the U.S. had been good to me"; that this is the best type of government to live under. However, they are concerned about the future as the government threatens social security cuts. No black mentioned this theme. They expressed no unpatriotic ideas--just an absence of this as an important theme.

In their stories, white (and particularly white men) were very concerned about giving correct names, dates, places; blacks on the other hand, showed almost an absence of interest in this. Stories were much more general and even if pressed about time, place, etc. there was little attempt to give it. Perhaps, this also comes from a difference in life experience of the two groups where for blacks this was less important and few events stood out that were important enough to date specifically.

Blacks expressed a more stoical acceptance of life. They had little

schooling, worked hard in the fields, raised siblings, married young and worked while raising their children. They had never had a time to rest and enjoy. Although they had suffered much they had a positive, accepting attitude toward life and took joy in each other's company. There was much more of a sense of community than in the white settings.

Discussion

This paper has attempted to summarize the general themes and values expressed through stories of early life by groups of elderly participants. Most of the participants in this project represent, in many ways, a relatively homogeneous group whose childhood and adolescence was spent in rural parts of the upper South and who moved to the city in the late thirties or early forties looking for work, as farming became more mechanized. Most shared early experiences of a hard early life, a family centered early life where religion and relationships with people were important. They learned to be self-sufficient, innovative, to persevere, and to endure. While there were many similarities between the early life experiences of the whites and blacks in this project, the greater degree of deprivation in the early life of blacks set the stage for a different set of experiences in adjusting to urban life. Most of the whites in the project had been upwardly mobile while most of the blacks had not been. Interestingly enough, the blacks in the project expressed more satisfaction and contentment with their life in older age than did the whites.

While one would not expect to generalize too widely from this limited sample, it does represent a group of elderly who have been less studied by the social scientists and this project should give use more understanding of the early life experiences of the rural southerner who migrates to the city and how the experiences and values that shaped their lives have contributed

to their adjustment to urban life. These participants, whose lives span three or four generations, have seen tremendous changes, both in their personal lives, and in the wider society. Their early years were spent in the agricultural era, their work years in the industrial era, and their older years in the emerging technological era. Although they cling tenaciously to values from early life, they have difficulty understanding and accepting many of the aspects of today's society.